

Message Text

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ACTION SCS-01

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FM AMEMBASSY GUATEMALA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4484

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LIMDIS

FOR ARA, SCA, AND NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: EAIR, CDES, GT

SUBJ: QUICHE AIR CRASH

REF: 76 GUATEMALA 7897 AND 7898, 76 STATE 286545

1. SUMMARY: EMBASSY WISHES TO KNOW FEASIBILITY OF NTSB INVESTIGATION OF CESSNA CRASH NOVEMBER 20 WHICH KILLED FIVE AMERICAN CITIZENS.

2. IN RELATION TO AIR CRASH REPORTED REFTELS, EMBASSY HAS RECEIVED: (A) LETTER FROM MR. THOMAS KERNDT, FATHER OF ONE OF THE CRASH VICTIMS, REQUESTING COPY OF GOG ACCIDENT REPORT AND ASKING IF PILOT, MARYKNOLL PRIEST WILLIAM WOODS, HAD EVER BEEN ADVISED BY US EMBASSY THAT HIS LIFE IN DANGER; (B) LETTER FROM DR. EARL BRIAN, CHAIRMAN OF BOARD OF DIRECT RELIEF FOUNDATION, SANTA BARBARA, CALIFORNIA, EMPLOYER OF MR. KERNDT'S DAUGHTER, REQUESTING "COMPLETE REPORT ON ACCIDENT SO THAT WE MAY BE CERTAIN THERE WERE NO UNUSUAL FACTORS INVOLVED"; (C) LETTER DATED DECEMBER 29 FROM CONGRESSMAN BLOUIN OF IOWA ASKING FOR "A FULL AND COMPLETE REPORT ON THE
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SITUATION AND ANY INVESTIGATIONS NOW PENDING IN THE MATTER EITHER BY OUR GOVERNMENT OR THE GUATEMALAN AUTHORITIES," AND ENCLOSING A LETTER DATED DECEMBER 1 FROM MR. KERNDT TO SECRETARY KISSINGER, TO WHICH WE ASSUME DEPARTMENT HAS REPLIED. KERNDT LETTER TO SECRETARY SAYS IN PART: "IN LIGHT OF THESE AMBIGUITIES, PLUS THE FACT THAT FIVE US CITIZENS WERE KILLED, AND

THAT IT WAS AN AMERICAN-MADE PLANE, I AM REQUESTING THAT AN INVESTIGATION BE MADE, IN ADDITION TO THE ONE BEING MADE BY THE GUATEMALAN AUTHORITIES, AND THAT A TEAM OF INVESTIGATORS FROM THE CIVIL AERONAUTICS BOARD BE SENT TO THE SITE TO INVESTIGATE THE WRECKAGE IN AN ATTEMPT TO DETERMINE THE ACTUAL CAUSE OF THE CRASH."

3. EMBASSY POUCHING THREE LETTERS AND ITS PROPOSED REPLIES TO ARA/CEN FOR REVIEW BEFORE FORWARDING TO ADDRESSEES.

4. AFTER REPEATED INQUIRIES, CONSUL OBTAINED IN SECOND WEEK OF DECEMBER COPY OF GOG ACCIDENT REPORT DATED NOVEMBER 25, COPY BEING POUCHED TO ARA/CEN, AND WE PROPOSE TO ENCLOSE IT WITH OUR REPLIES TO THE THREE LETTERS WE HAVE RECEIVED SO FAR. HOWEVER, OUR REVIEW OF THE REPORT LEAVES US TROUBLED, FOR TWO REASONS: (A) REPORT ATTACHES CHART FROM GOG WEATHER STATION IN HUEHUETENANGO, WHICH SHOWS UNLIMITED VISIBILITY THROUGHOUT THE DAY AND NEITHER WIND NOR CLOUDS THROUGH MOST OF THE DAY. ACCIDENT REPORT REFERS TO THIS FINDING, BUT THEN SIMPLY ASSERTS THAT "DUE TO THE OROGRAPHIC CONDITIONS, THE WEATHER IN THE AREA WHERE THE ACCIDENT OCCURRED WAS ADVERSE FOR A VISUAL FLIGHT." AT A LATER POINT THE REPORT SAYS THAT THROUGH CONVERSATIONS WITH VARIOUS RESIDENTS OF THE AREA IT WAS ESTABLISHED IT WAS RAINING AND CLOUDY AND THE CEILING WAS LOW AT THE TIME OF THE ACCIDENT. HOWEVER, CONSUL, WHO TALKED TO THE INSPECTOR WHO SIGNED THE REPORT, IS PERSONALLY CONVINCED THAT LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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INSPECTOR ONLY OVERFLEW THE CRASH SITE AND DID NOT LAND OR TALK TO ANY INHABITANTS OF THE AREA. IT IS POSSIBLE THAT THE INSPECTOR GOT THIS INFORMATION FROM GUATEMALAN MILITARY PERSONNEL WHO COLLECTED THE BODIES OF CRASH VICTIMS. HOWEVER, RESIDENTS OF AREA THAT CONSUL AND SUPERIOR OF MARYKNOLL ORDER TALKED TO SAID WEATHER HAD BEEN SUNNY AND CLEAR AT TIME OF ACCIDENT; (B) REPORT STATES THAT AIRCRAFT WAS "COMPLETELY BURNED TOGETHER WITH ALL ITS OCCUPANTS... DUE TO ELECTRICAL SHORT CIRCUITS...AND TO SPILLED FUEL." IT IS POSSIBLE THAT INSPECTOR GOT THIS IMPRESSION FROM AERIAL SURVEY. HOWEVER, NONE OF THE REMAINS OF THE VICTIMS, THEIR PASSPORTS OR OTHER PAPERS SHOWED ANY SIGNS OF FIRE, AND MARYKNOLL SUPERIOR WHO VISITED CRASH SITE SAID HE SAW NO INDICATION WHATEVER OF FIRE.

5. CONSUL CALLED ON DIRECTOR GENERAL OF CIVIL AERONAUTICS JANUARY 4 AND POINTED OUT DISCREPANCIES IN REPORT.

DIRECTOR GENERAL PROMISED THAT A NEW ACCIDENT REPORT WOULD BE IMMEDIATELY FORTHCOMING. NO REPORT HAS BEEN RECEIVED, AND ON JANUARY 13, CONSUL SPOKE WITH DIRECTOR GENERAL AGAIN AND URGED NEW ON-THE-GROUND INSPECTION OF AIRCRAFT. DIRECTOR GENERAL READILY SAID HE WOULD SEND INSPECTOR NEXT WEEK, AND VOLUNTEERED OFFER THAT US REPRESENTATIVE COULD ACCOMPANY HIM. ACCORDINGLY, MISSION OFFICER WILL BE VISITING SITE JANUARY 18. WE HOPE THIS INSPECTION WILL AT LEAST GIVE US ROUGH IDEA OF CONDITION OF AIRCRAFT AND WHETHER ANY FURTHER INVESTIGATION BY EXPERTS WOULD SERVE ANY PURPOSE.

6. WHILE WE AWAIT RESULTS OF ON-SITE INSPECTION, WE WOULD APPRECIATE DEPARTMENT'S VIEWS AS TO WHETHER NTSB WOULD BE ABLE AND WILLING TO UNDERTAKE INVESTIGATION. WE APPRECIATE THAT THIS WOULD BE UNUSUAL PROCEDURE SINCE CRASH NOT A MAJOR ONE, SINCE IT TOOK PLACE IN GUATEMALA AND SINCE PLANE WAS OF GUATEMALAN REGISTRY. CONCURRENCE OF GOG WOULD ALSO HAVE LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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TO BE OBTAINED. HOWEVER, PLANE WAS OF US MANUFACTURE, AND ALL VICTIMS WERE US CITIZENS. BECAUSE OF UNUSUAL CIRCUMSTANCES IN THE BACKGROUND OF THE PILOT, FATHER WILLIAM WOODS, WITH WHICH ARA/CEN IS FAMILIAR, AND WITH WHICH IT IS CLEAR DIRECT RELIEF FOUNDATION AND MR. KERNDT ARE ALSO FAMILIAR, THERE ARE INEVITABLY SUSPICIONS AS TO WHETHER CRASH WAS ENTIRELY AN ACCIDENT AND WHETHER GOG CAN BE RELIED UPON TO INVESTIGATE IT IMPARTIALLY. BEST WAY THESE DOUBTS COULD BE LAID TO REST, IN VIEW OF WEAKNESS OF GOG REPORT, WOULD BE IF NTSB COULD UNDERTAKE INVESTIGATION. BOSTER

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